Variations on Tyranny. From Pascal to Montesquieu

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1. *Tyranny in Pascal*

Pascal proposes an original definition of tyranny in fragment Sellier 91/Lafuma 58, entitled, precisely, 'tyranny':

> Tyranny is wanting to have by one means what can only be had by another. We have different duties to different sorts of merits: the duty of love to charm, fear to strength, belief to knowledge.
>
> We must fulfill these obligations; it is wrong to deny them and wrong to ask for others.
>
> Thus this discourse is false and tyrannical: "I am handsome, so I must be feared. I am strong, so I must be loved. I am…" And it is even false and tyrannical to say: "He is not strong, so I will not admire him; he is not clever, so I will not fear him.[1]

Pascal's definition of tyranny – ' wanting to have by one means what can only be had by another.'– removes the notion of tyranny from the field of political analysis and places it wherever there is an unjustified claim: ' I am handsome, so I must be feared', or the unjustified rejection of an appropriate behavior: 'He is not strong, so I will not admire him.'

The inappropriateness of a request, as well as the obligation to behave in a certain way, is based on the existence of domains governed by their own rules and purposes, which cannot be transferred

1 The following abbreviations are used in this essay: S = Blaise Pascal, *Pensées, opuscules, lettres*, ed. Ph. Sellier (Paris : Garnier, 2011) ; L = B. Pascal, *Pensées sur la religion et sur quelques autres sujets,* ed. L. Lafuma, 3 vol. (Paris : Ed. du Luxembourg, 1951), transl. R. Ariew, Pascal, *Pensées* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004); EL = Montesquieu *De l'esprit des lois,* in *Œuvres Complètes,* II, ed. R. Caillois (Paris : Gallimard, 1951); SL = Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, trans. A. M. Cohler, B. C. Miller, H. S. Stone, (Cambridge: Cambridge Up, 1989)

to other domains in which other rules and purposes apply. The existence of domains governed by their own rules and purposes allows us to identify tyranny both in the claim to impose behavior in areas other than those in which that behavior is due, and in the refusal to accept dutiful behavior within the same domain. Consequently, the existence of domains governed by their own rules and purposes implies the existence of duties, and therefore of values; tyrannical behavior is unjust behavior, and its injustice is determined by the behaviors that each domain imposes or excludes.

Because of these characteristics, the definition of tyranny depends on a basic thesis of Pascalian philosophy, according to which there are different 'orders' that structure reality, as stated in the famous fragment S339/L308, or different 'concupiscences', as stated in the equally famous fragment S761/L933. As is widely known, the notion of 'order' originates in the field of scientific knowledge, and has the characteristics assumed in that field, first of all the incommensurability between orders.[2] An 'order' is a natural or artificial domain, governed by its own laws and purposes, which are not interchangeable with those in force in other orders. An 'order' therefore exists wherever there are sets of realities that have these characteristics, according to the definition given by Jean Mesnard: 'a homogeneous and autonomous whole, governed by laws, adhering to a certain model, from which it derives its independence in relation to one or more other order. '[3] It follows that the notion of order extends beyond the areas in which Pascal explicitly used it, as does the notion of 'tyranny' that follows from it. Moreover, as Philippe Sellier has shown, the particular meaning given to the term 'tyranny' arises explicitly in connection with the notion of 'order'. Indeed, it is in the 17th *Lettre Provinciale* of 23 January 1657 that the term 'tyranny' is linked to the distinction of ' orders' , in this case to their violation by the Jesuits in the request to sign the declaration concerning the presence in Jansen's text of propositions considered heretical.[4] And it is from this period that the fragment S92/L58 dates, in which the connection between the notion of tyranny and that of order is explicit:

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2 See Christian Lazzeri, *Force et justice dans la politique de Pascal* [*Force et justice*] (Paris : PUF, 1993), 267-68.

3 Jean Mesnard, *Le thème des trois ordres dans l'organisation des pensées*, in Id., *La culture du XVIIe siècle. Enquêtes et synthèses* (Paris : PUF, 1992), 463. The text appeared in 1988, in Id., *Pascal. Thématique des "Pensées"* (Paris: Vrin), and was then included in the 1992 collection of essays, in a modified version. On the political consequences of the incommensurability of orders, see Yves-Charles Zarka, 'Les implications politiques des trois ordres selon Pascal', *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 102 (1997), 97-106. The whole issue no. 1, 1997 of *Révue de Mètaphysique et de Morale* is devoted to the problem of orders in Pascal.

4 See Philippe Sellier, *Port-Royal et la littérature.* I *Pascal* (Paris : H. Champion 1999), 232-235.

Tyranny consists in the universal desire to dominate beyond one's order.

There are various compartments of the strong, the handsome, the sensible [*bons esprits*], the pious; each of them rules there [*chez soi*] but not elsewhere, and sometimes they intersect.[5]

Precisely because of its close connection with the notion of 'order', and because of the pervasiveness of this notion in Pascal's work, the notion of tyranny must be considered at work in Pascal's philosophy beyond its explicit mention, together with the conceptual constellation that it involves. In the second *Discours sur la condition des grands,* the whole conceptual constellation of Pascal's tyranny emerges. Reference is made to the condition for using the notion of tyranny in the Pascalian sense, i.e. the existence of domains governed by their own laws and purposes; to the injustice of asking in one field what is right to demand in another; and, finally, to the most surprising aspect of Pascal's tyranny: the impotence to achieve one's goals. If you ask for my esteem because you are a duke but lack the natural qualities that spontaneously produce this esteem, not only 'you would be unjust to demand it to me' but 'assuredly you would not succeed in gleaning it from me, were you the greatest prince in the world.'[6]

The injustice that Pascal speaks of in the case of the violation of the rules and purposes that apply in each order has a paradoxical aspect: the "right" behavior is actually spontaneous and natural behavior – it is natural to appreciate the intellectual qualities of a man – and as such is not susceptible to being commanded. The command, however, and the resulting injustice, is applied in the request to violate natural behavior, a request that is inherently destined not to achieve the desired effect. Tyranny, therefore, presents itself as unjust and impotent.[7] The impotence of tyranny also emerges in the two twin fragments on tyranny S91/L58- and S92/L58, explicitly so in the second:

There are various compartments of the strong, the handsome, the sensible, the pious; each of them rules there but not elsewhere, and sometimes they intersect. And the strong and the handsome fight to see who is master, but this is foolish, for their mastery is of different kinds. They do not understand one another. Their mistake is to want to rule everywhere. Nothing can do this, not even strength, which is of no use in the realm of knowledge and governs only external actions.

5 Ibid., 234-35.

6 Blaise Pascal, *Discours sur la condition des grands*, in B. Pascal, *Pensées, opuscules, lettres*, ed. **Ph. Sellier (**Paris: Garnier 2011), 752.

7 See Lazzeri's enlightening analyzes in *Force et justice*, chap. IV.

Impotence is a paradoxical characteristic when associated with tyranny. It is enough to leaf through the pages devoted to tyranny by Bodin to note the emphasis on the tyrant's ability to take possession of everything that rightfully belongs to his subjects, and thus on his success.[8] The last thing we expect from a tyrant is to set goals that he is destined not to be able to achieve, as happens instead with Pascal's tyranny. In the fragment on orders S339/L308, the notion of 'ridiculous' is even used in relation to those who want to apply the logic of one order to another order: it is ridiculous to be scandalized by the low condition of Jesus Christ. And, indeed, the examples chosen by Pascal to illustrate the exercise of tyranny border on the ridiculous: 'I am handsome, so I must be feared. I am strong, so I must be loved. I am…' The word 'ridicule' appears on other occasions when the existence of non-communicating domains or 'orders', is theorized. It is equally 'ridicule' for reason 'to demand from the heart proofs of its first principles before accepting them, as it would be for the heart to demand from reason an intuition of all demonstrated propositions before receiving them' (S142/L110). One cannot help wondering at the transformation of Bodin's cruel and fearful tyranny into Pascal's impotent and ridiculous tyranny.

The examples and consequences that Pascal draws from the definition of tyranny lead us to believe that Pascal's tyranny no longer has any conceptual connection with the tyranny of Bodin or de La Boetie. Tyranny, associated with impotence and ridicule, should no longer be frightening. Yet if this were the case, Pascal's definition of tyranny would have no connection with the current use of the term. Why should we call tyrannical and not, for example, unreasonable, the claim of someone who demands esteem without possessing the qualities that naturally require it?

Actually, it is not true that the fearful aspect of tyranny has been eliminated in Pascal's proposal, and therefore that any connection with the violent and powerful tyrant is lost. See fragment S135/L103, which uses the notion of tyranny in a sense much closer to the traditional one: 'Might without justice is tyrannical.' Not only is this association of tyranny with force without justice much closer to the tyranny discussed by Bodin, but the new definition of tyranny proposed by Pascal also fits very well with Bodin's description of tyranny, as seen in the 17th *Provincial Letter*. Jesuit tyranny cannot transform a question of fact into a question of right: 'The question, then, still rests upon the point of fact, and cannot possibly be tortured into one affecting the fact'. In this sense, the tyranny of the Jesuits is impotent. 'But though incapable of twisting it into a matter of heresy, you

8 Jean Bodin, *Les six Livres de la République*, II (Paris : Fayard 1986), 55 : 'A tyrannical monarchy is one in which the monarch tramples underfoot the laws of nature, in that he abuses the natural liberty of his subjects by making them his slaves, and invades the property of others by treating it as his own.'

have it in your power to make it a pretext for persecution', Pascal goes on to note.[9] This is what tyranny can do, that is, it can persecute those who refuse to admit that the condemned propositions are found verbatim in the writings of Jansen. Through persecution, the Jesuits could not ensure that those who finally agreed to sign the formula accusing Jansenius's text of heresy would be convinced that the heretical statement was actually found in that text, but they could ensure that the formula would be signed against conscience, out of fear, with the alternative of being treated as heretics and therefore punished for not signing: 'What a piece of monstruous tyranny to place them in such an unhappy dilemma, that they must either bring guilt in the sight of God, by signing that condemnation against their consciences, or be denounced as heretics for refusing to sign it.' Pascal's impotent and ridiculous tyrant remains fearsome because he is violent. For this reason, Pascal can use the qualification of "tyrannical" to describe a behavior for which it would otherwise seem more appropriate to speak of unreasonableness. In fragment S135/L103, the point of overlap between the traditional and Pascalian meanings of tyranny is precisely the use of violence: 'Might without justice is tyrannical.' The use of violence can be successful not in achieving in one domain what belongs to another domain, but in ensuring that in one domain external behavior is adopted which corresponds to what tyranny, at least officially, aims at. This is what the second fragment on tyranny states: 'Nothing can do this, not even strength, which is of no use in the realm of knowledge and governs only external actions.' If, hypothetically, the tyrant did not wish to take possession of consciences at all, but only aimed to obtain external or pretended adherence, he could achieve his goal. While it is impossible to obtain esteem for someone who lacks the qualities that naturally produce it, it is possible to obtain an outward display of the esteem through violence.

Pascal's tyranny, removed from the confines of political analysis and made potentially universal, remains the field of injustice, arrogant pretension, and violence, wherever it appears, and this despite – or perhaps because of – its own impotence. We will now ask whether Pascal's proposal found an echo and whether it influenced the sphere of politics from which it had been expelled.

2. *Tyranny after Pascal: Montesquieu*

If Pascal's proposal regarding the reconceptualization of the notion of tyranny has an echo in the subsequent ethical and/or political discussion, this echo should have the following characteristics: 1. Tyranny should be inserted into a structure of reality organized into domains that do not communicate with each other. 2. Anyone who uses violence to obtain in one domain the external

9 Blaise Pascal, *Les Provinciales*, ed. L. Cognet, G. Ferreyrolles (Paris : Garnier, 2023), 463.

signs of what can only be obtained in another area should be judged morally reprehensible. 3. Anyone who claims to achieve effects in one domain that can only be produced in another area should be judged powerless. I propose to trace these characteristics, and thus the evidence of Pascal's legacy, in a great theorist of society and politics, Montesquieu.

Tyranny is not a central word in Montesquieu's political analysis. For authoritarian regimes, without a legislative structure to which the rulers are subject, Montesquieu's terms of choice is 'despotism'.[10] However, the word "tyranny" appears here and there in the *Esprit des lois*. It appears in Book VIII, devoted to the *Corruption of the principles of the three governments*, where Montesquieu takes up a consolidated tradition on the subject of tyranny and identifies it with the degeneration of a legitimate regime. The intention to refer to the classical use of tyranny is explicit in a note in Chapter XIII of Book XIV, where Montesquieu clarifies the meaning of tyranny: 'I take this word to mean the design of upsetting the established power, chiefly democracy. This was its meaning for the Greeks and Romans.' (EL, 487/SL, 243)

The explicitly classical use of the term "tyranny" makes the title of Chapter III of Book XIX, *On tyranny,* even more striking. This book is devoted to the relationship of laws to the other principles that form the 'general spirit' of a nation, as the title states: *On the laws in their relation with the principles forming the general spirit, the mores [moeurs], and the manners [manières] of a nation.* Montesquieu sets out to investigate the relationship of laws to two other components of the 'general spirit of a nation', namely 'the mores' and 'the manners'. In Chapter III, entitled, precisely, *On tyranny*, there is no longer any reference to the classical use of this concept. This chapter begins with the division of tyranny into two categories: 'real' tyranny, 'which consists in the violence of the government', and tyranny 'of opinion, which is felt when those who govern establish things that run counter to a nation's way of thinking.' (EL, 557-58/SL, 309)[11] Tyranny is here associated with real or "perceived"

10 It seems that the term did not appear in France until 1689. Cf. Richard Koebner, 'Despot and despotism: vicissitudes of a political term', *Journal of the Warburg and the Courtauld Institute,* 14 (1952), 275-302, 300.

11 Cf. Bertrand Binoche, *Montesquieu et les deux tyrannies (De l'esprit des lois, XIX, 3)* In Alain Lemaître, ed. *Le monde parlementaire au XVIIIe siècle* (Rennes : Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2010, https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pur.100623, 155-167.

violence. Indeed, the beginning of the chapter includes within tyranny a government's actions that are not strictly violent but are perceived as such. This case is exemplified by the story of Dion, according to which the Roman people, indignant against Augustus for some laws that were too harsh, were pacified as soon as Augustus himself made the comedian Pylades return to Rome: 'Such a people felt tyranny more vividly when a buffoon was driven out than when all their laws were taken from them.' (EL, 558/SL, 309) The chapter informs us that the feeling of being tyrannized does not necessarily correspond to the "physical" exercise of violence.

Chapters V and VI warn against excessive interference with the spirit of a nation: even with the best of intentions, one is likely to produce negative results. Following this line of reasoning, Chapter XI issues a warning to rulers whose laws 'run counter [*choquent*] to the general spirit' of a nation. They must be clear about the difference between morality and politics. It is not certain that what is valid in one domain is also valid in the other. One can assume that those who apply in politics the criteria valid in morality are exercising a form of tyranny, since the verb that indicated perceived violence in Chapter III returns here: actions that 'run counter [*choquent*] to a nation's way of thinking' are tyrannical. However, this time what disturbs the 'general spirit' of a nation takes on a more precise character. A well-defined type of disturbance is now being pointed out, resulting from the fact that 'moral vices' are deemed 'political vices' and vice versa. But in reality, morality and politics do not overlap: 'I have only wanted to make it understood that not all political vices are moral vices and that not all moral vices are political vices, and those who make laws that run counter to the general spirit should not be ignorant of this' (EL, 563/SL, 314).

Continuing this theme, in Chapter XII, Montesquieu warns that, in a despotic state, a change in customs imposed from above would immediately be followed by a revolution. [12] A despotic state is not based on laws, but on 'manners' and 'mores', and these are inherent in the general spirit of a people. A law that intended to change them

12 I use the word "custom" meaning both *moeurs* and *manières.*

would, like any law, propose to modify by a 'particular act' that which pertains to the 'general' characteristics of a people: 'Laws are established, mores are inspired; the latter depend more on the general spirit, the former depend more on a particular institution' (EL, 563/SL,314). The topic is brought into thematic focus in Chapter, where Montesquieu provides a general indication concerning the subject: 'when one wants to change the mores and manners, one must not change them by the laws, as this would appear to be too tyrannical; it would be better to change them by other mores and other manners' (EL, 564/SL, 315). This time, the notion of 'tyranny' is explicitly evoked by the decision to modify 'mores' and 'manners' through laws. The importance of this point is such that Montesquieu includes it among the structural maxims of government. In fact, we find it in that collection of scattered notes to which Montesquieu himself refers as *Mes pensées*. Among the short, but very demanding maxims devoted to the management of political power and, therefore, of the laws, Montesquieu inserts the following maxim: 'What can be done by mores must not be done by laws.'[13]

In Chapter XIV of Book XIX of *Esprit des lois*, Montesquieu continues: when a prince wants to make great changes in a nation, 'he must reform by laws what is established by laws and change by manners what is established by manners, and it is a very bad policy to change by laws what should be changed by manners.' The underlying reason for this maxim is based on the different origin and scope of competence of laws, mores, and manners, as will be clarified in Chapter XVI of the same Book XIX, *How some legislators have confused the principles that govern men*: 'Mores and manners are usages that laws have not established, or that they have not been able, or have not wanted, to establish.' The different origin of laws, mores and manners is reflected in the different field of their action: 'The difference between

13 Montesquieu, *Mes pensées,* (630, IV) in *Œuvres Complètes,* I, éd. R. Caillois [*OC*], (Paris, Gallimard : 1951), 1150; trans. H. C. Clark, *My Thoughts* (1007, IV) (Indianapolis : Liberty Fund, 2012), 281.

laws and mores is that, while laws regulate the actions of the citizen, mores regulate the actions of the man. The difference between mores and manners is that the first are more concerned with internal, and the latter external, conduct.' (EL, 566/SL, 317)

The prohibition against using laws to change customs is followed by an example taken from the policies of Peter the Great, that is, the ruler of a state – Russia – which Montesquieu judges to be moderately despotic (EL, 466, note b/SL, 221, note 9).[14] While the apology for Peter the Great in Voltaire's *Histoire de Charles XII*, published in 1731, was already circulating in France at the time, Montesquieu's intervention is relatively early and precedes both Voltaire's more extensive apology of Peter the Great – *Histoire de l'empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand*, 1763- and his harsh criticism of Rousseau in the *Contrat social*.[15] In line with the sociological aim of his work, the source used by Montesquieu is John Perry, *State of Russia under the present Czar*, a text published in 1716. Perry is an English engineer who worked for Peter I. After returning to his homeland from a period of semi-imprisonment in Russia, he sought to inform the English public of the 'several improvements which the czar has made among his people.'[16] It was therefore a work with a strong apologetic tone. Among the many observations and information on the condition of Russia, Perry included a detailed account of the measures taken by Peter I to modify the customs of Muscovites regarding the use of long beards and floor-length clothing,

14 On the reactions to Montesquieu's work in Russia, see Mikhail Kiselev, 'Montesquieu's Treatise De L'Esprit des Lois and Fundamental Laws in Russia in the Early 1760s', *Quaestio Rossica* 5 (4) (2017), 1131-48.

15 On the analyzes of society and politics in 18th-century Russia, see Marc Belissa, *La Russie mise en* lumières. *Représentations et débats autour de la Russie dans la France du XVIII° siècle* (Paris : Kimé, 2010). Pages 36-7 are devoted to Montesquieu. See also Marshall T. Poe, '*A people born to Slavery*'. *Russia in Early Modern European Ethnography 1476-1748* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000). On Montesquieu's contribution to the debate on Russia, see Celine Spector, *Science des moeurs et théorie de la civilisation. De l'*Esprit des Lois *à l'école historique écossaise*, in B. Binoche ed., *Les équivoques de la civilisation*, (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2005), 136-60.

16 John Perry, *State of Russia under the present Czar* [*State of Russia*](London: Benjamin Tooke, 1716, unpaginated preface).

requiring the cutting of both.[17] In the same pages, Perry then illustrated the ways in which Peter I was modifying the customs of women, who had previously been kept in a state of semi-imprisonment, tickling their vanity and their desire for a social life, with the aim, also in this case, of bringing the customs of the Russian population closer to those of Europe. Without naming him, Montesquieu uses Perry's testimony and comments on it as follows:

> The law that obliged the Muscovites to shorten their beards and their clothing and the violence of Peter I in trimming up to the knees the long robes of those who entered the towns were both tyrannical. The means for preventing crimes are penalties; the means for changing manners are examples. (EI, 564-65/SL,315)

Although Perry had described the cutting of clothes as an operation that aroused good humor rather than indignation, [18] Montesquieu saw it only as an act of violence, and for this reason he could classify it as tyrannical. Peter the Great's behavior is deemed tyrannical by Montesquieu because the sovereign used the laws to change customs by applying them in an area foreign to them. Indeed, actions that neither benefit nor harm the public are excluded from the scope of the laws: 'Every penalty that does not derive from necessity is tyrannical. The law is not a pure act of power; things indifferent by their nature are not within its scope.' (EL,565/SL, 316)

This use of the concept of tyranny invites us to return to the components of the 'spirit' of a nation, according to Montesquieu's theory. Laws, mores, and manners are the three components of the spirit of a nation but, where they are distinct – and they are not always so – tyranny consists in the use in one area of means that are legitimate only in another. The components of the spirit of nations have the characteristics of Pascalian orders, that is, they are systems governed by specific ends

17 On the imposition of beard cutting, see Evgeny Akelev, 'When did Peter the Great Order Beards Shaved?' *Quaestio Rossica*, 4 (2017), 1107-1130.

18 Perry, *State of Russia*, 198: 'there were many hundreds of coats that were cut accordingly; and being done with a good Humour, it occasioned Mirth among the People, and soon broke the Custom of their wearing long Coats.'

and means that are not transferable to another system. Like Pascal, Montesquieu employs the notion of tyranny to indicate the use in one system of tools specific to another system: laws to modify customs. The first characteristic required to speak of Pascal's influence on the use of the notion of tyranny, i.e. the presence of the equivalent of Pascal's ‘orders’, is indeed found in Montesquieu.

Let us now verify the presence of the second and third characteristics that are based on the existence of orders, that is, let us verify whether Montesquieu judges unjust and impotent those who, in one domain, claim to obtain effects that can only be produced in another domain thanks to the laws that apply in the latter. Criticizing the behavior of Peter the Great, Montesquieu states that ‘the violent means he employed were useless; he would have accomplished his purpose as well by gentleness.’ Still, ‘he did not need laws to change the mores and manners of his nation; it would have been sufficient for him to inspire other mores and other manners.’ (EL,565/ SL, 316)

Is the uselessness of which Montesquieu speaks comparable to the injustice and impotence of Pascal's tyranny? After all, Peter the Great got what he wanted in the end. Perhaps the means used were disproportionate, but why unjust and impotent? Ultimately, it was a matter of intervening in the very area where tyranny can succeed, that is, in external behavior. The first impression is that Montesquieu simply judges the use of violence in this case to be disproportionate: ‘he did not need laws to change the mores and manners of his nation; it would have been sufficient for him to inspire other mores and other manners.’ But as the text goes on, we see that these are not simply disproportionate measures, but first and foremost unjust measures because they produce unhappiness: ‘In general, peoples are very attached to their customs; taking their customs from them violently makes them unhappy: therefore, one must not change their customs, but engage the peoples to change them themselves’ (EL,565/SL, 316). The laws of Peter I about cutting beards and clothes are not only

‘useless’, but conflict with the purpose of political associations, that is, with the happiness of citizens. For this reason, ‘one must not change’ customs by the laws. This prohibition, derived from the purpose of political society, appears to be a moral prohibition, close therefore to Pascalian injustice.

If we then want to find the equivalent of Pascal's impotence, we must look more closely at what Montesquieu means when he speaks of the uselessness of laws in changing customs. Let us return to the passage already quoted from Chapter XVI:

The difference between laws and mores is that, while laws regulate the actions of the citizen, mores regulate the actions of the man. The difference between mores and manners is that the first are more concerned with internal, and the latter external, conduct. (EL,566/SL, 317)

Laws address behaviors that may harm other citizens and protect each citizen from harm that other citizens might inflict on them. Mores, on the other hand, not only concern man as such, but ‘are more concerned with internal … conduct.’ ‘Laws are established, mores are inspired’, Montesquieu had said in Chapter XII (EL,563/SL,314). Just as, for Pascal, esteem cannot be obtained by means of power, so, for Montesquieu, mores must not, and indeed *cannot*, be changed by laws. Mores not only concerns actions that fall outside the scope of the laws because they are indifferent to the protection that citizens expect from the state, but they also imply an internal attitude over which the laws have no power. This time Perry's account gave Montesquieu proof of the correctness of his analysis. In the pages devoted to the imposition of beard-cutting, we read that Perry met a carpenter who had just left the barbershop without the long beard he usually wore. When Perry asked the carpenter what he had done with his beard, the latter ‘put his Hand on his Bosom and pull'd it out, and shew'd it to me; farther telling me, that when he came home, he would lay it up to have it put in his Coffin and buried along with him, that he might be able to give an Account of it to st. Nicholas, when he came to the other World and that all his Brothers of him (meaning his Fellow-workmen who had been shaved this day) had

taken the same Care.'[19] Tyranny had ensured the performance of the external action, the cutting of the beard, but the lack of the beard would be felt as a painful mutilation until death.

If we want to find in Montesquieu's words an explicit echo of the impotence of Pascal's tyranny, we must go further and turn to Chapter XVI of the same Book XIX, *How some legislators have confused the principles that govern men*, where Montesquieu analyzes another despotic regime, the Chinese one. As in the case of Peter I's Russia, tyranny occurs where it would seem impossible to identify it, that is, within a despotic regime, where, in principle, everything should be considered tyrannical according to the classical definition of tyranny. For Bodin, it would have been a tautology to say that a despotic system is tyrannical. For Montesquieu, who adopted the premises from which Pascal derived the definition of tyranny, a despotic regime is not necessarily a tyrannical regime, but may engage in tyrannical behavior.

This is one of the most significant results that Montesquieu achieved by adopting Pascal's proposal on tyranny. Even a despotic regime can constitute what Pascal would call an 'order' and be based on popular consensus. But when in a despotic regime there are acts that violate the logic that governs that same despotic regime, the consensus is broken and it may happen that the people rebel, because these acts are perceived as tyrannical. The notion of tyranny proposed by Pascal allows for a flexibility in political analysis unknown to Montesquieu's predecessors.

The events in China illustrate the degeneration of a despotic state into tyranny. China is a state that perfectly fits the model of a despotic state outlined by Montesquieu, because it has no laws. Everything is governed by what the Chinese call 'rites', that is, a mixture of laws, mores, and manners. Montesquieu underlines the functionality of this model which works by shaping citizens' mentality and ensuring that the values and rules that apply in Chinese society are translated into natural behaviors. If we wish to remain within Pascalian logic and accept that the 'orders' are not

19 Perry, *State of Russia*, 196-97.

systems established once and for all, these Chinese ‘rites’ constitute an order in themselves, in which laws, mores, and manners are not distinguished. The coercion of despotic power, which pervades every action of the Chinese citizen, is therefore not perceived as tyrannical. Indeed, it doesn't even make sense to talk about ‘coercion’ for Chinese despotism.

A despotic state that has succeeded in making its own order work, as in the case of the Chinese ‘rites’ which had become an organic system of government, can still act tyrannically with respect to its own despotism. This happened in China when the rulers tried to change the rites by means of torture. With this intrusion of violence into an order dominated by ritual, not only did the rulers fail to achieve their goal, but the Chinese state experienced such profound rebellions that it fell into total anarchy. Note how Montesquieu comments on the Chinese rulers’ failure: ‘Those princes who, instead of governing by the rites, governed by the force of punishments, wanted to have punishments do what is not in their power, which is to give mores’ (EL,568/SL,318). The repetition of Pascal’s definition of tyranny is surprising. We are reminded of fragment S91/L58: ‘Tyranny is wanting to have by one means what can only be had by another.’ We can thus further clarify the accusation of ‘uselessness’ that Montesquieu leveled at Peter I’s laws to change certain customs. The uselessness of which Montesquieu spoke in relation to the tyranny of Peter I not only indicated the excessiveness of the measures adopted, but also revealed their injustice and impotence, where an action in accordance with the logic of custom would have achieved the desired effect with great simplicity. Like Pascal, Montesquieu believed that when a tyrant seeks to bring about an internal change (concerning esteem in Pascal’s case, customs in Montesquieu’s), insofar as he tries to intervene by means that have no power over the inner life of men, his measures are destined to prove impotent – and ridiculous, Pascal would have gladly added.

What is striking is Montesquieu’s reiteration of Pascal’s definition of tyranny, centered on the use of force by rulers in an area where other means should be used to achieve the desired ends. Montesquieu could have known fragment S92/L58, whose logic, as we have seen, is reflected in the

analysis and assessment of Peter I's behavior. He could also have known the fragment on the three orders, as well as the *Discours sur la condition des grands*. But Montesquieu could not have known fragment S92/L58, the one that contains Pascal's famous and iconic definition of tyranny, because this fragment was not included in the Port Royal edition of the *Pensées*, the only one to which Montesquieu had access. This evidence of which texts were known and accessible to Montesquieu allows for an interesting thought experiment. The experiment consists in verifying what happens to a thinker who ignores Pascal's famous definition of tyranny but accepts its premises, i.e. the existence of orders, and qualifies the behavior of anyone who violates its logic as tyrannical. Even without knowing the Pascalian fragment that contains the definition of tyranny, Montesquieu reproduces it in relation to a behavior similar to that to which he himself had applied the judgment of tyranny, in the case of Peter I, as a logical consequence of having accepted the premises from which Pascal had derived this definition.

Montesquieu's use of Perry's account, then, clearly shows the consequences of assuming the existence of 'orders' and the illegitimacy of violating them. Drawing on Perry's book, Montesquieu highlights how easy it is to change people's customs by the appropriate means: 'He himself saw how easy it was to make changes' (EL, 565/SL,316). When it came to changing women's habits and clothing in Russia, women were summoned to court and offered fabrics suitable for European-style dress. Perry's account described Peter I's interventions with evident approval, whether it was the cutting of clothing – an object of good humor rather than censure – or the liberalization of women's customs. In his account, however, Montesquieu distinguishes the behaviors he stigmatizes as tyrannical – the imposition of cutting clothes and beards – from those that he praises as wise – the westernization of female customs – on the basis of a preliminary choice: to regard as tyrannical any behavior that seeks to modify one order – customs – by another order – laws– and as wise any behavior that seeks to modify certain customs by the means belonging to the order to which the customs belong, or by other customs.

3. *Conclusion*

I hope I have succeeded in showing that the violence, injustice, and impotence of Pascal's tyranny, linked to the violation of 'orders', can be found in Montesquieu's tyranny in the violation of the autonomy of the three components of the spirit of nations, laws, mores, and manners. Once the logic of 'orders' was accepted by Montesquieu, it was applied to areas far from its original one, as had already been the case with Pascal, thereby implicitly multiplying the accusation of tyranny whenever orders are violated. For example, Pascal had warned against imposing religion through threats in fragment S203-L172: 'The way of God, who disposes all things kindly, is to implant religion into minds through reason and into hearts through grace. But wanting to implant it into minds and hearts with force and threats is not implanting religion, but terror, *terror rather than religion* [*terrorem quam religionem*].'Pascal quoted Augustine to the same effect in fragment S490/L591: ' *If they were being led by terror, without guidance, it would seem like wicked domination* [*Ne si terrerentur et non docerentur improba quasi dominatio videretur*].' Anyone who tries to impose faith by threats will succeed in instilling fear, but not in giving faith: another violent and impotent act of tyranny. These two fragments do not appear in the Port-Royal edition of the *Pensées*, and were therefore probably unknown to Montesquieu, who nevertheless did not fail to express his agreement with Pascal in his *Pensées:* 'Heaven alone can produce devout people; Princes produces hypocrites.'[20] Once again, we have a metamorphosis of orders, once again an impotent tyranny.

But Montesquieu shows an unexpected consequence of adopting Pascal's reflection on tyranny. While Montesquieu thinks in harmony with Pascal in the fragment just quoted, he does not hesitate to turn against Pascal the logic that the latter inspired in him. Montesquieu does not often quote Pascal, but he explicitly mentions him twice in his two collections of scattered reflections and considerations, the *Spicilège* and the

20 Montesquieu, *Mes pensées,* (630, X) *OC*, I, 1151 ; *My Thoughts* (1007, X), 281.

Pensées. Unfortunately, with the current state of research, it is impossible to establish the chronology of the two references to Pascal, although it would certainly be very useful to know it, since they both refer to the famous Pascalian fragment of the 'wager [*pari*]'and both criticize it, but with two divergent observations. The first mention of the *pari* is found in the *Spicilège*: 'Mr. Pascal's argument "You gain everything by believing and gain nothing by not believing" is very good against atheists. But he does not establish one religion rather than another.'[21] Here Montesquieu expresses the same criticism of the *pari* as Pierre-Daniel Huet, Claude Gilbert,[22] and the Marquis de Lassay.[23] In fact, he may have derived this observation from a reading of these authors, without necessarily sharing their perspective in full. This would explain the completely different tone of the second reference to Pascal, contained in the *Pensées*. Here he does not at all grant that the argument is 'very good against the atheists'. Indeed, Montesquieu does not find it 'good' in any respect. Montesquieu's *pensée* goes like this: 'M. Pascal's famous argument is very good for giving us fear, but not for giving us faith.'[24] 'But wanting to implant it into minds and hearts with force and threats is not implanting religion, but terror', said Pascal, and whoever behaved in this way would be a tyrant, according to his criteria. Montesquieu does not hesitate to formulate the same analysis on the subject of the *pari*. This famous argument advises us to use in matters of faith what does not belong

21 Montesquieu, *Spicilège*, in *Oeuvres Complètes* XIII, ed. R. Minuti (Oxford-Napoli: Voltaire Foundation- Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici, 2002), 347. Montesquieu's remark is in full harmony with the comment that Huet adds to the Pascalian fragment in his copy of the *Pensées*: 'This reason is good for the Deists, but not for the Christian religion, because it is equally suitable to all religions and what proves too much proves nothing.' See Antony McKenna, 'Huet et Pascal', *XVIIe siècle,* 147 (1985), 135-142. I owe this observation to Laurence Devillairs, whom I thank.

22 Antony McKenna, *De Pascal à Voltaire. Le rôle des* Pensées *de Pascal dans l'histoire des idées entre 1670 et 1734*, II (Oxford : The Voltaire Foundation, 1990), 555, concerning the criticism of Pascal in Claude Gilbert' *Histoire de Caléjava*, published in 1700.

23 Le Marquis de Lassay, *Recueil de différentes choses* (Lausanne : Marc-Mic Bousquet.LASSAY, 1756). Enlarged edition. First edition published in 1727. See the passage reported in McKenna, *De Pascal à Voltaire*, 830.

24 Montesquieu, *Mes pensées* (2119), *OC*, I, 1551; *My Thoughts*, (420), 158.

to its order, and obviously it will not achieve what it is intended to achieve. For this reason, Pascal also risks producing hypocrites rather than men of faith.

Thus, according to Montesquieu, Pascal is a sorcerer's apprentice, because he himself proves to be tyrannical, in one of the most famous passages of his apology for the Christian faith.[25]

25 An Italian version of this essay will be published in the proceedings of the Conference *Blaise Pascal. Fonti e eredità*, held in Rome, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 27-28 September 2023.